

Facing Up Series 02: Smoke Screen

by Jaye Reid

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Smoke Screen

By Jaye Reid

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~*~

Maggie sat upright in bed. As if from a bad dream, the sound of a fire truck and ambulance woke her suddenly. Their sirens blaring shattering the peace of the cold morning. Then they stopped, close. Too close for Maggie's liking. She quickly clambered out of bed and grabbed her jeans and a jumper. Her shoes were lying on the floor near the front door, amongst the unpacked boxes. Her coat slung over the back of a chair. Any remnants of sleep quickly disappeared when the cold morning air hit her face. She could smell smoke. But that was nothing unusual for this time of year. The nights were cold. Even

the house she was now renting had a wood heater. She would have lit it last night if she had have had the fire wood. But looking up the street she could see the cloud of dark smoke. Too much for just a heater. As she hurried along the street she hoped that it was merely a bundle of raked leaves left smoldering from the day before, reignited. But her worse fears were realised as she got closer. The fire brigade had already started channelling water through the broken window in the front of the house. As she stood there watching helplessly, the police car pulled into the curb.

"Maggie?" called Jack, getting out of the car.

"Hi, Jack. Doesn't look good."

"No, it doesn't. What are you doing here?"

"I'm just around the corner. I heard the sirens."

"I think most of Mt. Thomas would have. It's such a still morning. I'd better find out who rang the fire brigade. See if they know if anyone would have been home. The house looks fairly lived in."

"Yeah it does. The fire looks to be contained to the front part of the house though."

A few people had been drawn out on this cold morning to see what was going on. "I'll have a word to the crowd," said Maggie, "then move them along."

Jack nodded towards Maggie and then he headed over to the fire officers.

Maggie walked over to where the crowd was milling. She zipped her jacket up, hoping to keep out the cold. It didn't work.

"Does anyone here know the occupant of the house?" asked Maggie.

A middle aged woman, still wearing her long chenille dressing gown and slippers stepped towards Maggie. "Mrs. Donald," she said, "Kathleen Donald.

"And you are?"

"Maureen Cook. I live two doors down. Where is Kath? Is she alright?"

"Do you know whether or not Mrs. Donald was home last night?" questioned Maggie.

"Yes, she was. We walked home from a meeting at St. Stephen's. Our Ladies Guild. We said goodnight at her gate. Where is she?"

"Well at moment I really can't speculate. Everyone please your attention," called Maggie, "There isn't anything to see. Please go home. We would appreciate it if you could please just clear the area. She turned again to Mrs. Cook, "we will do whatever we can to locate your friend."

"Well she wasn't actually my friend," said the woman, "not the friendliest person, but I do hope she's alright."

"Yes, okay then," said Maggie, "perhaps it would be best if you went home, before you catch your death of cold out here."

The woman nodded, and shuffled back along the pavement in her slippers to her home.

Maggie walked back over to where Jack was talking to the fire officers. "Jackâ€¦ anything?"

"Nah, not much. Apparently it was a guy who rang from his mobile. Saw the smoke on his way to work. They have his name back at the station. But I don't think he will be of much help. Just in the right place at the right time."

"Sounds like it could be the case. But we'd better be sure of the facts anyway. Ah fellas?" turning her attention to the fire officers, "the house was occupied. How soon before we can get access?"

"Give us a couple of minutes," said the officer in charge. "Fire's been contained to the front of the house. Just want to be sure before I go putting anyone in there."

"Okay, thanks. Just give us a yell," said Maggie.

Maggie and Jack walked back over to the police vehicle. Jack leaned on the bonnet and watched the others do their work.

"Look Jack," said Maggie, "I'm going to head back home. You can handle this here for awhile can't you?"

"Yeah, of course," he replied.

"No worries then, I'll send someone out here..."

"Hey!" yelled the Fire Brigade Captain.

Maggie went over to where he was standing.

"We've got a fatal in here," he replied. "One of the fellas lives further down the street and knew Mrs. Donald. He says it is her. On the floor near the burnt out lounge room."

"Okay, I will notify VKC, we'd better get the Coroner down here. Is the fire totally out?"

"Yeah, it is," he replied.

"Well, you know the routine until the Coroner gets here. Jack can tape down the scene."

"No worries. By the way, I know who Jack is, you areâ€¦?"

"Oh, sorry. Senior Sergeant Maggie Doyle. I replaced Tom Croydon last week."

"Great," he said extending his hand, "Marcus Dempsey, welcome to Mt. Thomas."

"Thanks Marcus. Actually I was stationed here a few years back, so I

actually feel like I've come home."

"Well, it's nice to meet you. We'll have to catch up sometime, a drink or something?" he asked with a smile.

Maggie smiled back. He seemed like a nice sort of guy, "Yeah, you know where to find us."

"The Imperial? You all hang out there don't you." It was more of a statement than a question. Maggie nodded.

"Well, I'd better get going," said Maggie, "get ready for work."

"See you later Senior Sergeant."

"Maggie, call me Maggie," she said as she walked back to where Jack was still sitting on the car.

"Hummmm," said Jack with a cheeky grin, "making friends and influencing people already."

"Don't start," she replied. She knew where Jack was going with his comments. She didn't have anytime in her life for anything except the job.

"You heard?" she asked, "there's a fatal."

"Yep, I've called VKC to notify the Coroner. I'll tape the perimeter down in a tick."

"Okay," Maggie replied, "well I'll see who is on this morning, send down some help for you."

"I think Jason would be a good choice. I know it can be a bit gruesome, but as a Probationary he could do with as much varied experience as possible," said Jack.

"Your sounding like a well aged Sergeant, do I have to watch my back here?" she replied.

Jack smiled, "No, I don't think you have anything to worry about. The job's all yours."

"Well, I'm going. I'll see you back at the Station later today."

"Yeah, no worries," replied Jack.

Maggie headed off down the street. She broke into a short jog, hoping to warm herself up. It didn't really do anything, except make her realise how unfit she was. She made a mental note to think about getting a bit fitter. She had to set a good example to the others. Not that it really mattered. They were all much younger than her and obviously played sport to keep fit. She on the other hand, had never found time for sport. Except for the odd game of darts or pool when the likes of Nick Schulz or P.J. had set a challenge. She couldn't walk away from a challenge. But not that either of those games required a lot of physical activity. And considering the way she played, skill either!

She arrived home, made herself a couple of pieces of toast and had a quick shower, before heading out the door.

The others were already at the station by the time she arrived. "Good morning. How is everyone today?"

"Yeah, good," said Bec. with a grin. "You have a delivery in your office."

"Oh, okay," replied Maggie. "There has been a house fire this morning. A fatal. Jack is out there now. Jason, I'll give you the address. Can you head over there and give him a hand?"

"Bad?" Jason asked, getting up from his desk. "We heard about it when we got in. Jack was talking to VKC to find out the E.T.A of the Coroner."

"Bad enough," Maggie replied. She grabbed a piece of paper from the front counter and wrote down the address. "Here, you'd better get over there now."

Jason took the paper reluctantly. He knew he would have to do these sort of things. He looked at the address. He reminded himself that he was a copper, and this was part of the job, like it or not. "On my way," he said.

Maggie opened her office door. A bunch of flowers lay wrapped in purple cellowrap on her desk. She smiled as she picked them up and carried them to the main office.

"The florist delivered them early," said Bec., pointing to the flowers. "I think there was a card."

Maggie couldn't see one, so she went back to her desk. The card had detached and was sitting on her desk. The message simply read "Good Luck." It carried no name or identification as to whom it was from. Maggie was puzzled, but assumed that sender would phone to see if they had arrived. Perhaps they were from her father. She decided to phone him later. In the meantime, the flowers needed water. "Ah Bec.," said Maggie, "do we have anything that Iâ€|"

"I don't think you'll find a vase," said Bec., interrupting, "we don't really get much call for them around here. Maybe an empty coffee jar?"

"That'll do," said Maggie, "where?"

"Um, you could try the cupboard under the sink," she replied.

Maggie found a jar and after filling it with water and the flowers, placed them on the mantle in her office.

She turned around as the front station screen door slammed on its springs. Tom came wandering in. "They're nice," indicating towards the flowers. "How's it going?" he asked coming into her office.

"Well," she said looking at her watch, "considering I have been in charge for, oh, all of half an hour, okay I suppose," she replied

cheekily.

"I know, sorry," said Tom, "I wasn't planning on calling in already. But I heard about the fire this morning. Heard it was a bit suspicious?"

"Really? Well word does travel fast. We haven't even made a positive identification yet," she replied.

"It will be Kath. though won't it?"

"We're still investigating," she said in her official voice.

"No leads?"

"Tom! Give us a chance. The ashes wouldn't even be cold yet!"

"I'm sorry. Forget I called in," he said turning to leave.

"No. Bossâ€¦ Tom. It isn't that. It's just that Iâ€¦"

"Want to be able to do this without me looking over your shoulder." He finished the sentence for her.

"Yeahâ€¦ I guess so," she replied, "I want to be good at this."

"You will be. I trained you well," he replied with a grin.

Maggie laughed. "Perhaps you can help though."

"Oh?" said Tom.

Assuming it was Kathleen Donald, she was a member of your parish? We'll contact next of kin, but I'm wondering if you knew much about her?" Maggie queried.

"Well, a bit. May I?" Tom asked as he pulled up a chair. Maggie nodded and gave him one of her 'I don't believe you just asked' looks as he sat down.

He felt uncomfortable on the other side of the desk.

"Kath. used to help out with fetes and the like up at St. Stephens. Nell. used to say that she was a bit of a stick in the mud. Wasn't overly popular. Called a spade a spade, you know the type."

Maggie nodded.

"But her heart was in the right place. Her husband, ahâ€¦ Sid. That was it, Sid. He passed away a couple of years ago. There is a son and a daughter I think. That's about it really."

"Money?" asked Maggie.

"I think they were reasonably comfortable," replied Tom. "I wouldn't say they were loaded. They had a farm out towards Stoney Creek, but I think they sold that when the kids left home and then they moved into town."

"Thanks, it is a bit of background at least," said Maggie.

"No worries, anytime, you know that," he replied. "I'd better be off then, you know where to find me if you need anything."

Maggie followed Tom out into the main office. "See you," she said as he walked out the door.

"Checking up on you?" said Josh. to Maggie.

She just grinned. "Is Paul in yet, or is that expecting too much from out Detective."

"No, he's in." Josh. replied.

"Could you call him out here please," she asked.

Josh. didn't move from his desk. "HEY PAUL!" he yelled.

The C.I. office door opened shortly after. "What?"

"Boss wants ya." Josh replied.

"Campbell, I could have done that you know," Maggie said with a shake of her head.

"Oh, you wanted me to go in and get him?" said Josh. with a grin, "Sorry, I will remember that next time."

"Okay," said Maggie, "team meeting."

The others looked at each other.

"Except of course that Lawson and Kelly are missing, but we can fill them in later on. Right the fire this morning. We can't do much until we know whether the fire was accidental or deliberate, so what else do we have on today?"

"I've got a bus safety talk at the Primary School," said Bec. "I'm scheduled to be there from 11 am until 1.30 this afternoon."

"Okay," said Maggie, "Josh., why don't you go out on patrol. Make sure the law abiding citizens are doing just that."

"What do you want **me** to do then Snr. Sgt?" said Paul cheekily as he lent on the counter near his office."

The radio came to life. "Mt. Thomas 208 to Mt. Thomas Station."

"Answer the radio," replied Maggie with a grin.

"Yeah, yeah," said Paul, "Mt. Thomas Station to 208, receiving."

"That you Paul?" quizzed Jack.

"Roger Jack, what can I do for you?"

"You might want to get around here," said Jack, "it's looking like

the fire was deliberate. Arson squad need to be called."

"What have you found?" asked MacKenna.

"An empty fuel can amongst the charred area of the house. It was probably used to start it."

"Roger, Mt. Thomas 208, I'm on my way." Paul returned the microphone. "Well I guess that answered my question. If anyone wants me, you know where I am."

"I'll get on to Arson," said Maggie and headed back to her office.

It was early afternoon when a well dressed man walked into the station. Constable Campbell went to the counter. "Good afternoon, how can I help you," he asked.

"I'm Tony Donald," he replied, "I wantedâ€¦I wanted to talk to someone about my mother, Kathleen Donald?"

"Ah, yes Mr. Donald," said Josh., "my condolences, please come through."

Josh. opened the side counter and let Tony Donald into the main office before knocking on Maggie's door.

"Come in," she called, looking up from her paperwork.

"Ah Boss, I've got Tony Donald here, Kathleen Donald's son. He'd like a word?" said Josh.

Maggie nodded. She dreaded these visits from grieving relatives. "Show him in," she replied.

Tony Donald entered her office and she motioned for him to take a seat.

"Ta," he said, "I could do with sitting down. I've just come from the hospital. It's been quite a shock. I was only talking to her last week."

"Yes, I am sorry for your loss Mr. Donald." Said Maggie.

"Thought she'd be around for a long time yet," he continued, staring into space. "She was pretty fit for her age. Never been sick. Not like the old manâ€¦" He looked back at Maggie "â€¦cancer, he battled it for years."

Maggie nodded knowingly.

"No one can seem to tell me how it happened," he said. "I saw Marcus Dempsey down at the fire station, he said to come and talk to you."

"Well Mr. Donald, we are still conducting an investigation into the fire," she hated this part, "and we have reasons to believe that the fire could have been started deliberately."

Tony Donald sat back in the chair as if someone had pushed him and

all the air had been sucked out of his lungs. "Deliberate?" he said angrily, "who would want to do a sick thing like that?" he said angrily.

"There was an accelerant used in the fire, the arson squad are still running tests, but it appears to be kerosene. We won't know exactly until sometime tomorrow."

"This is incredible," he said still shocked, "how could someone do this?"

"Well Mr. Donald," said Maggie, "perhaps you could help us. Can you think of anyone at all who may have a grudge against your Mother or your family?"

He stared blankly at Maggie. "Look, Mum was a bit of an old biddy at times, probably rubbed a few of the old dears at the Ladies Guild and Senior Citizens up the wrong way. But nothing, nothing that would cause something like this. Grudge against the family? Well neither of us have lived here for years. Liz., my sister, lives in Melbourne. She is at home with the kids. Her husband Jeff is a teacher. I'm up in Bendigo, I have my own Personnel company. My ex. wife and the kids are in Albury. Hell, the kids, I should ring them about their Gran."

"Mr. Donald, is there anyone perhaps you can think of? Someone who was overly annoyed that they didn't get a job they wanted?" queried Maggie.

"No," he replied, "not off the top of my head. Surely no one would link me back to here and Mum? No, I don't think so."

"Well if you think of anything that may help, please give us a call."

"Yes I will," he replied, getting up to leave, "please let me know if you find anything. I am staying at the Imperial, can't go to the house of course. Liz. will be here later today. We have to organize the funeral."

Maggie opened the office door and showed him out. She had only just sat back down at her desk when there was a knock at her door.

"Come in," she called.

It was Bec.

"Ah, got a minute?"

"Sure Bec., come on in," replied Maggie, "everything okay over at the school? I used to enjoy doing the school rounds, the kids were so much fun."

"Yeah, everything's fine," she said closing the door.

"So, what is the problem?" asked Maggie.

"Well, no problem really. Ah, I'm not really sure how to say this without you taking it the wrong way."

"Oh, okay," said Maggie, "Look, take a seat. Whatever it is, I want my Officers to feel that they can come to me and talk. I know it can be difficult being the only female officer. I was here myself for a long time before another woman arrived."

"Well it's about you really, not me," replied Bec.

Maggie wasn't quite sure where this was going, but decided to keep an open mind.

"Well, I'll just say it," said Bec.

Maggie nodded.

"Um, well, you don't really have too many friends left here do you? I mean everyone really except Jack has moved on. Anyway we are having a get together tomorrow night, our netball team that is, and well, I was wondering if you might like to come along? I just thought it may be a chance for you to get out? You know, make new friends. Look, I don't want to interfere in your business and I would hate you to think that I'm trying to earn brownie points with you because you're the new Boss, I well"

"It's okay Bec.," interrupted Maggie, "really. Look thank you for the offer. Um, if I'm not doing anything. Where are you going to have this?"

"Down at the footy clubrooms," said Bec. getting up from her chair, "after training. We usually get a decent fire going in a couple of old 'forty-fours', to keep us warm. About 7, 7.30 pm."

"Okay," said Maggie with a smile, "I'll see if I can make it."

"Great, that would be great," said Constable Brett enthusiastically. "Um, I'd better get back to it. Got some paperwork to do from the school visit."

"Yes, I've have plenty to do too," said Maggie, "I never realised how much there really was. I might have to get you guys to start helping. I know Tom used to pass a lot on to me."

Bec. went to leave.

"You can leave the door open," said Maggie, "I don't like to be shut away in here too much."

Maggie watched Bec. go back to her desk. She seemed to get along with everyone and Maggie was touched that she would be concerned about her. Netballers. She had never played the game much, just a bit at school. Bec. would make a good netballer she thought. A natural athletic build. Tall and wiry. She had a mop of short red curls that bounced around her ears. She wondered if there was a temper lurking under those red curls. Chris Reilly had always prescribed to the theory of flaming red heads!"

The rest of the afternoon progressed without much incident. Maggie sent Campbell and Kelly out door knocking the streets around Kath. Donald's and Brett to the Senior Citizens Club to see if they could find any motive or reason behind the fire. Det. MacKenna was out and

about with the arson squad doing his own bit of investigating.

The officers arrived just before end of shift and passed on any information they had to Maggie.

"Are you coming down to the Pub Boss?" asked Josh. as he was leaving.

"No. Thanks all the same," replied Maggie, "I have a bit more paperwork to do and then I think I might go home."

"Okay then, see you tomorrow," he responded.

"See you," she replied.

Maggie spent another hour at her desk before deciding that she had enough for one day and headed for home.

She unlocked her front door and fumbled in the dark for the hallway light switch.

After relocking the door behind her, Maggie switched on the lounge room light. All she could see were boxes. They had sat there for two days and she hadn't unpacked a thing. She wandered down the hallway to the kitchen and threw her keys onto the bench.

She grabbed an apple out of the frig. And wandered back to the lounge room. Most of the boxes were labeled. She ripped the tape off a couple and started unpacking the contents. She didn't have many belongings. Books and framed photo's fitted neatly into her bookcase. She threw the scatter cushions onto the couch and a rug over the back. Maggie found the crystal vase that had been her mothers. She carefully unwrapped it and held it up to the light. Good, no cracks. She remembered the flowers that she had left in their coffee jar, still sitting in her office. She'd have to remind herself to bring them home.

By the time most of the boxes were unpacked in the lounge, Maggie was getting hungry. She still hadn't found time to go shopping, so she picked up the phone and ordered pizza. While she waited, she decided to unpack some of her clothes and linen. Amongst the boxes in her bedroom was one that was unfamiliar. At first Maggie thought the removalists may have delivered it by mistake. She removed the tape from the top. As she looked inside, memories came rushing back. This was an old box. One that she had packed when leaving Mt. Thomas all those years ago, and never felt ready to open. Now it sat before her, the box wide open, and the contents starring back at her. She sighed as she reached in and emptied the contents onto her bed. There were several photo albums. She grabbed the pillows, and propped them under her chest as she lay on her stomach on the bed.

She took a deep breath as she opened the cover of the first album.

She glanced at the pictures of herself and then to the mirror on the dressing table infront of her. Had she changed? She was happy with her appearance. Comfortable with who she was. Well, at least with who she let everyone else see.

The photo's. A sunny day at the river. She tried to remember the

occasion. Adam Cooper, Dash McKinley, Nick, P.J.. It was a barbeque and they seemed to be celebrating. She turned the page and remembered. There was a photo of Adam, holding his side, and laughing. She remembered the day. It was after Adam had been released from hospital, his wife's boyfriend had taken pot shots at him and unfortunately connected. They had taken him out for the afternoon to try and cheer him up. Help him forget.

The next page, an annual Christmas party at the Boss' house. Forced smiles, everyone pretending to have a good time for Toms sake. He did try hard. Maggie suddenly realised the Christmas party would be her responsibility now. She cringed at the thought. A later worry.

Maggies reminiscing was momentarily interrupted by a knock at the front door. Her dinner had arrived. She came back to the bedroom and went back to the albums. Another one, full of holiday photo's. Hamilton Island, the week spent at the beach house at Lorne. The long weekend on the houseboat on the Murray. All with P.J.

Hamilton Island and Lorne had been tricky. She grinned at the memory of getting their individual stories straight as to where they had spent their holidays. She often wondered if the others were laughing behind their backs. Sometimes the stories just didn't come out right. Even a Probationary Constable should have been able to see through them.

The boat on the Murray had been different. Tom knew they were going. They made no secret of it to him when they put in for their weekend off.

She closed the album, and put it aside. There were loose photo's in the bottom of the box. She looked through them. They had been taken at her send off from Mt. Thomas. Maggie had always meant to put them in an album, but never quite got around to it. There was no P.J. She had organised her transfer in his absence. Everyone knew something had happened between them when he disappeared on leave for a week without Maggie. Well they assumed something had, he didn't tell them where he was going. His mother had actually had a fall, so he had taken a week off just to make sure she was okay. But he wasn't in the habit of telling everyone his business. Everyone except Maggie of course.

And then she announced she was leaving. No one was game to ask what or why?

Amongst the photo's were letters he had written to her after she left. She had opened the first one, but there were two others, still unopened. She took the letters and placed them on her bedside table. She thought that she might read them later.

Maggie looked over at her alarm clock. It was already after midnight. Well past time for sleep. She didn't want to look like death in the morning. She took the albums and the loose photo's and put them in her bookcase in the lounge, before going to bed.

The next morning in the C.I. office, Paul was on the phone.

"Yeah mate, it has been awhile... yeah good... yourself?"

Nah, never any rest for the wickedâ€¦ oh, you knowâ€¦ Problem? No, actually I think I sorted it out myselfâ€¦ Yeah, wasn't as difficult as I thought it would beâ€¦"

There was a knock at the door and Maggie opened it.

"Got a minuteâ€¦ oh sorry," she said, "didn't realise you were on the phone, I'll come back later."

Paul glanced at her as she was backing out of the door.

"No hang on Maggie." He went back to the phone.

"Ah yeah mate... yep, it certainly isâ€¦ yeah, look, I've got to go. We catch up... definitelyâ€¦ soonâ€¦ not a problem, yep... and thanks for calling back. Yeah... bye." Paul hung up the phone.

"Now, sorry about that Maggie, old friend, you know how it is."

"That's okay," Maggie replied.

"What have you got for me?" he queried.

"Well, I had Bec., Josh. and Jason all out speaking to neighbours and Senior Citz. They pretty much said the same thing about Kath. Donald."

"But of course, now, they don't want to speak ill of the dead?" replied Paul.

"Yeah, something like that. Anyway apparently there has been some guy, a Damien Jackson, canvassing the whole area looking for work. He offered to do some gardening and then fix a fence either side of Kathleen Donald, so you could safely assume that if she was home he would have gone there as well."

"Any priors?"

"Yes," continued Maggie, "thief, few car stealing charges, they are fairly old though."

"Do we know where he is at the moment?" asked Paul.

"Yes, Jack has managed to track him down. He's doing some maintenance over at the SteamPacket."

"Well, I think I might go and have a chat with him," said Paul. "Do you mind if I take Bec. with me?"

"That's fine," replied Maggie getting up from the chair. "I didn't have anything specific for her to do this morning."

Jack came bursting into the station through the back door and headed for Maggie's office.

"Hey Henry!" called Bec., "she's not in there. She is in with Paul in the C.I. office. And why aren't you in uniform. You're meant to be on duty."

"Has anyone checked that they haven't killed each other in there yet?" replied Jack backtracking.

"Nah," replied Jason, "we thought we would have heard a scuffle or something. The Boss wouldn't be defeated without a fight."

"Well it aint the Boss I'd be worried about," said Jack as he knocked on the C. I. Office door. "She is well capable of looking after herself."

Jason and Bec. just looked at each other and grinned.

Paul opened the door, and he and Maggie entered the main office.

"Um Maggie, I need some time off," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"Well," said Jack, "it's a couple of weeks early but Claire thinks she is in labour and Iâ€|"

"Go Jack," said Maggie, "just go before she has this baby in the street."

"Thanks," he replied with a grin as he bolted back out the door.

"Come on then Annie," said Paul MacKenna cheekily to Const. Brett as he grabbed one of the portable radio's, "let's go out and do some work."

Bec. gave him her best fake smile.

"What, you can't cope without a uniform to hold your hand Paul?" chipped in Const. Campbell.

"Oh, very funny!" said Const. Brett taking one of her usual playful swings at Josh's arm, "as if."

"Nah," said Paul, "would you prefer me to hold your hand Josh?"

Everyone cracked up laughing.

"Annie?" said Maggie to Jason as she walked back to her office.

"That's from your generation isn't it?" Jason replied before he realised what he had said. "Oops, sorry. Um, there was a film, orphan Annie?"

"Ah," said Maggie, getting the joke, "the red curls." She headed into her office and closed the door. They were a real comedy team her officers, and she liked it.

The day progressed. The preliminary autopsy results showed that Kath. Donald had died from a heart attack. But the circumstances surrounding her death were still sketchy. She also had a head wound that was recent. Perhaps she interrupted an intruder and the shock induced the heart attack. They were checking dabs. taken from the

scene and running them through fingerprints to see if there were any matches on file.

Det. MacKenna and Const. Brett had gone over to the SteamPacket Hotel. They had radioed in to say that Damien Jackson was not at the hotel but they had been given a couple of locations where they might find him. They were going to follow up the information.

Maggie overheard Josh. Campbell talking to Jason after he took the message from MacKenna.

"More likely they have headed off for a secluded picnic," he said with a mischievous grin.

"You reckon?" replied Jason. "Are you jealous or something?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Josh. retorted.

"Oh, nothing." Said Jason with a smile, going back to his computer.

Maggie took note of the comments. Just what she didn't want, Office romances. God, how hypocritical would I be if I discouraged it, she thought to herself. But she knew better than anyone how things could sometimes get out of hand. Especially if there was more than just the two officers involved. She shuddered at the nightmare memories that she endured. And besides, as far as she knew, not even Jack knew about the problems that had arisen. He only knew about her relationship with P.J.

It was lunchtime when Paul and Bec. returned. They had radioed in that they would collect the lunches on their way back in. Everyone was waiting hungrily by the time they arrived.

"So what did Mr. Jackson have to say for himself?" asked Maggie fishing around in the box for her salad roll.

"Not a lot," replied Bec. "Said he had visited so many people in the last couple of weeks, he wouldn't know one person or street from another."

"Unfortunately," said Paul, "it appears he was at the Steam Packet for the last two days. Got stuck into the grog the night before and it took several people to wake him yesterday. Most of the staff can verify this."

"Could he have been faking it?" asked Jason.

"No. Not likely apparently. He was pretty out of it."

"Well, there goes that theory," said Maggie, "so, what else have we got?"

"Not much," Paul replied.

"Hey all!" said Jack, wandering in through the back door of the station. "False alarm with Claire, so I am here for duty. What's happening?"

"Team meeting," said Paul with a grin towards Maggie.

"Huh??" Jack replied.

"Don't worry about it Jack," replied Bec., "just Paul here being smart."

"Nah, impossible," replied Jack. "He's a Detective!"

Maggie laughed, Paul gave a fake look of hurt and Jason patted him on the shoulder with a 'there, there' expression on his face.

The front door of the station opened and Tony Donald walked in.

"Hello, Mr. Donald," said Maggie. "Can I help you?"

"You mentioned yesterday," he said, "about anyone who may have a problem with me or my business."

"Yes, Mr. Donald. You have thought of someone?" she replied.

"Well, not one person directly," he answered, "but I downloaded my client base last night. There are a couple of people who no matter what jobs I put them up for, just don't seem to be getting anywhere. They are getting a bit, wellâ€| you knowâ€| annoyed."

Maggie could think of a couple of other descriptions that he could have used, but considering everyone was standing there, he chose his words diplomatically.

He left Maggie with a list of nearly a dozen people before leaving.

"Well," said Maggie, "looks like we have a few phone calls to make."

She divided up the list and distributed it to the other officers.

"We need to know what they were doing and where they were on the morning of the fire," said Maggie. "Alibi's then need to be verified too. It needs to be done thoroughly, okay."

They all nodded.

"I might make a few phone calls myself," said Paul. "Have a bit of a look at Mr. Donald's business dealings. See how he is going financially. It wouldn't be the first time someone has bumped off dear old Mum to cash in on the inheritance."

They all looked at him with disbelieving expressions. Maggie however knew that what Paul had just suggested could always be possible.

"What did I say?" he asked looking at each of them.

"You're getting too cynical these days," said Jack.

"Nah mate. Just realistic," he replied and headed back into his office.

Jack and Bec. spent the rest of the afternoon on the telephone. While Jason and Josh. headed out on patrol.

"God, my ear is sore," commented Bec. after hanging up the phone from yet another call.

"Have you got any likely suspects yet?" Jack asked.

"No, everyone seems to have an alibi," she replied. "I still have a couple of those to check too."

"Well you had better hurry up if you plan to get to netball training on time tonight," said Jack looking at the clock on the wall. "I have to get out of here soon too. The kids are starting footy training without me tonight."

"Hell, yeah." she replied glancing at the clock.

After a few more calls, Bec. and Jack had checked the entire list, and come up with nothing.

They relayed this to Maggie before leaving for the day.

It was just after 7 pm when Maggie arrived at the football ground. She was beginning to wonder why she came, but thought it may keep poor Bec. from worrying about her.

"Hi Maggieâ€¦..you made it," said Bec. as Maggie wandered toward the glow of the fire. There were several people gathered around the drums. Some standing, others sitting on blocks of wood. Maggie's eyes were adjusting in the half darkness, scanning the faces for anyone she knew.

"Everyone, this is Maggie," said Bec. as she reached the fire. "Do you want something to eat, drink?"

"Nah, I'm right at the moment thanks. I think I will thaw out first."

From the other side of the fire came a voice.

"It's Maggie Doyle isn't it?"

Maggie looked through the glow of the fire, trying to place a name to the face of the young woman opposite her.

"You don't remember me do you?" she quizzed.

Maggie looked at her.

"Hell, I used to cause enough troubleâ€¦ it's Macca!â€¦ Fiona McKinley."

"Oh my God, Macca! I'd never have recognised you," replied Maggie.

Macca moved around and stood with Bec. and Maggie.

"Oh I doubt you'd forget her," said Bec.

Macca gave Bec. a friendly wipe on the arm.

"Well," said Maggie, "how _are_ you? Where is your Auntie Dash, still traipsing the world? Last time we spoke it must be, oh well, I'm not sure. She was about to backpack across Asia."

"That would be oh, two or three years and a couple of trips ago," replied Macca. "She is somewhere in Europe at the moment. She phones Dad every now and again. I can't wait to tell her you're back here."

"Oh I'm sure she will get a laugh out of it," replied Maggie. "We lost touch after she went to Asia. I think I moved house. Mail was forwarded on for awhile. But didn't know where she was. When is she coming back?"

"Who knows," said Macca, "That's what we are all wondering. She apparently met some guy over in Poland. He's actually an Australian, travelling too. They were in Amsterdam last we heard. He's got a bit of work in a pub. Auntie Dash is still looking for some work. We're wondering whether they will ever come back."

Maggie just smiled at the news. She realised how much she had missed Dash. "And what about you?" asked Maggie.

"This here," interrupted Bec., "is our talented 'A' grade wing defence."

"Defence!" said Maggie, " always thought you would be more of an 'Attack' myself!"

Macca laughed. "Yeah, I was a bit of a handful."

"Was?" said Bec., "_is _more like it!"

"So _good_ to know who your friends are," said Macca to Bec. with a grin.

"Ah, anytime, you know that," she replied with a laugh.

"Well," said Macca, returning to Maggie's question, "I am studying my last year at School, I'm planning on doing Medicine at Uni. next year if I can get enough marks to get in. There aren't enough Doctors wanting to work in the country areas. Poor Gran. used to have to travel to Melbourne all the time. I want to come back one day and save a lot of hassle for people like her."

Maggie smiled. "Your Gran. would be pretty impressed."

Maggie chattered to Bec. and her friends for awhile, but she felt out of place. They all had common interests, and she felt like an outsider. By 9 pm. she made her excuses to go. Still settling in, unpacking to be done, etc., etc., When she arrived home however, Maggie didn't really feel like doing anything except go to bed.

It had been another cold night in the house for Maggie. She stood under the hot streaming water of the shower for longer than necessary, just to try and get warm. She had not organised firewood yet, so the house was without heating. She had remembered seeing a

sign out at one of the local Service Stations advertising firewood for sale. She decided to leave for work a little earlier and call in to find out details regarding cost and delivery.

"It wasn't me officer?" the Service Station attendant said, with a grin, as she walked through the door.

Maggie grinned back. "If I had a dollar for everytime I heard that oneâ€|. No I am actually interested in the sign about the firewood. I have a wood heater that I need to get going if I am going to survive these cold nights."

Not a problem, well I have 20 kilo bags for \$25.00. It's about the same rate anywhere."

"Sounds fine," she replied. "I will call past on my way home from work tonight then."

"Not a problem," he replied.

Maggie turned to leave.

"Oh," he said, "I heard you were looking into the fire at Kath. Donald's?"

"Yes, we are," replied Maggie turning back to him.

"Can't believe she is dead," he continued, "she was only in here the afternoon before."

"She bought her firewood here too?" asked Maggie.

"No, I think she must have bought it by the trailer load. No, she used to buy a tin of kero. here, oh, about once a month. Silly old woman, used to use it to get the fire started. I told her she would burn the place down one day."

Maggie listened with interest. Maybe they had been looking in the wrong place all the time.

She walked into the station.

"Team Meeting," she said to everyone. "Josh. can you please _go and get _ Paul out here?"

Josh. did as he was told and actually went to Paul's office this time.

"What's up?" Paul asked, leaning on the side counter.

"The fire at Kath. Donald's," she said. "I may have some new information."

"Like what?" asked Jack.

Maggie told them of her conversation with the Service Station attendant regarding the kero. that Mrs. Donald regularly bought.

"Did we only have the one empty tin?" she asked Paul

"Yes," he said, "as far as we found at the scene. What is your theory Sgt.?"

"Well just suppose," replied Maggie, "that Mrs. Donald was lighting the fire with the kerosene and it went up too quick, or she may have spilt some on the carpet or something that caught alight. She has panicked and had a heart attack."

"Yes, it sounds good in theory," said Bec., "but what about the head wound?"

"Couldn't she have hit her head on something as she fell?" asked Jason.

"Good thought," replied Maggie. "Did we find anything to support that theory?"

"Well, to be honest," said Paul, "we weren't really looking. Perhaps since Jason here suggested it, he can come with me and we can go and have a look."

Paul and Jason headed out to Kath. Donald's house, while Bec. and Josh. went out on patrol.

"So, how are you finding your first week so far?" asked Jack.

"Yes, okay I suppose," she replied. "It feels really strange being back here. I mean I sort of expect things to be the same as they were when I left. I know it is illogical, but there was you and Ben, Tom and P.J. all here when I left. I sort of almost expect to see any of them walk through the door, coming back from patrol or a case."

"Well we weren't all here when you left," said Jack. "P.J. was away when you left, remember?"

"Hum, yes I know. Guess that didn't go down too well when he got back," she replied.

"No, not really. Haven't you noticed that the C.I. office door is different?" continued Jack. "I think he got off the phone one day after another unsuccessful attempt to get in touch with you and put his fist and foot through it!"

"Ohâ€|â€| not too good at all then," she said looking at the door, trying to remember what the old one looked like. "The old door, wasn't it the same as these?" she said point to the door of the interview room, "they're solid timber."

"Yeah, it was. Lucky he wore steal capped boots, but he busted three fingers. I took him to the hospital. He wasn't a very happy person for those few months before he left."

Maggie could see that the conversation was going to get a bit awkward.

"Well, I have a mountain of paperwork," she said, "I had better get stuck into it."

Jack assumed that she didn't wish to discuss the subject and went back to his own paperwork.

Paul and Jason radioed in to the station. They had found what could have been blood on the door frame. It had been overlooked in the original search for clues. They had all assumed that they had been looking for a weapon. Maggie notified St. David's who were sending someone over to check out a sample for blood type matching.

It was late afternoon when a match had been made with Mrs. Donald's blood type. Maggie's theory was looking more and more probable. They would now just have to wait until the Inquest to see if the Coroner also agreed. Maggie notified Tony Donald of their theories, and let him know that the report for the Coroner would read the same. He seemed slightly comforted that no one he knew had been involved.

Everyone had left at the end of the day for The Imperial. And once again, Maggie was still stuck at her desk, finishing up her report. She looked up at the flowers still sitting on the mantle and realised she still hadn't phoned her Dad to thank him. She picked up the phone and dialed his number.

Pat Doyle answered. "Hello."

"Dad? Hi, it's Maggie."

"Hello sweetheart. How's it going?" he replied.

"Oh, you know. It will take a bit of time to get used to being back here. But they seem like a good crew. Jack Lawson is still here, so I have a familiar face. I think I'll be okay." She said.

"That's really good love. I meant to get in touch with you but I guess this week has disappeared really quickly. Anything much happen in your first week?"

"Oh, something is always happening somewhere," she replied.
"Actually, yeah, it's been a very hectic week. Between work and trying to unpack, I'm exhausted."

"Now don't you go over doing things," he warned, "I know how you throw yourself into work and forget that the rest of the world is still out there."

"No," replied Maggie, "I'll be fine."

"Good. Look I hate to cut it short love, but I've got a meeting. I have to get going."

"Yeah, not a problem Dad. Look give me a couple of weeks to get sorted out and come up for the weekend."

"I'd like that," Pat replied, "give me a call, okay?"

"No worries Dad. See you later then."

"Bye love." And he hung up the phone.

He had been surprised at her decision to return to Mt. Thomas,

especially after what had happened. He had actually enjoyed Maggie being in the city. They had lunch together when she wasn't rostered on. Traditional Sunday roast, just like when her mother had been alive. Maggie looked so much like her. He'd hoped that she would settle down, give him some grandchildren to spoil. And he thought he was going to get his wish.

He hadn't been happy at first when he found out Maggie was seeing P.J. Hasham. He'd had his suspicions for awhile. Thought a few threats may warn him off. But he found that Hasham wasn't the sort to scare easily. Especially when he wanted something. And especially when that something was Maggie.

Then one day, out of the blue, there was Maggie on the doorstep. Asking to stay until she found her own place. She'd left Mt. Thomas and had transferred to the Drug Squad in Melbourne. He took Maggie's lead. She didn't mention P.J. other than if he rang, she wasn't home.

Maggie looked at the flowers as she hung up the phone. They obviously weren't from her father. No one else had owned up to sending them either. Oh well, she thought, they were lovely anyway. Someone was thinking of her. She took them from their makeshift vase, tapping the stems on the jar to get rid of some of the water. She turned off her office light and grabbed her jacket from the coatstand. She flicked off the light in the main office. She could see light coming from beneath the C.I. office door. Instinctively she went to head towards it when she realised she was in the same place, but another time. She sighed to herself and smiled.

She was back home.

End
file.